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## HIS RELIGIOUS LIFE

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The opportunity afforded the present writer is one of which any friend of President Harper may well be proud, though it presents some peculiar difficulties, owing to the remarkable combination of qualities in his abounding personality, each of which seemed unfettered by the others, but, when presented without the others, affords a one-sided exhibit of his nature. It must be remembered also that with Dr. Harper the act that it seemed best to do was first done, and then justified at the bar of reason and conscience. As Professor Small well says: "The impulse of religion, rather than a theory of it, was the constant undercurrent of his life."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is true that, while brave and outspoken in the expression of his feelings and opinions, he was naturally reticent on the subject of his personal relation to God. It is necessary, therefore, to examine his character at certain special epochs, and to quote some of his language uttered then, if we would discover the highest religious motives that he cherished; and it will be needful to take a general view of his life in the length and breadth of his activity, if we would avoid confusing him with the conventional saint.

In early childhood began that interest in the Bible which has been a characteristic feature of President Harper's public life. This was due in part to the unfeigned faith which dwelt, first, in his grandmother Rainey, who was well known among the members of her denomination for her accurate knowledge of the Bible. Before William was able to read, his helpful parents were drawn upon as readers of his "good book" (a children's life of Jesus) to him, and before he was ten years old, he had committed to memory large portions of Scripture. Sometime during his boyhood he found himself at variance with some of the sentiments of his parents, who were United Presbyterians, and he expressed a desire to join the Presbyterian church of his native town. This desire may not have been particularly strong,

<sup>1</sup> In the *Standard* for January 20, 1906.

and, at any rate, he was easily dissuaded by his father, who at that time took a somewhat different view of such a matter from that which commended itself to him in subsequent years. These details are given in order to account for the impression of his aged mother that he was "a good Christian boy from childhood." This was not, however, the view of the youth himself. On this point the writer is able, upon unimpeachable testimony,<sup>2</sup> to quote his own emphatic language used in Granville, Ohio, in 1877. By his fellow-teachers there it was taken for granted that he was a church member, as they were, and nothing to the contrary appears to have been known till he himself opened the question of "being a Christian" several months after his arrival in the place; and it came as a complete surprise to most, if not all, of those that knew him best, when he arose in a college prayer-meeting, near the end of January, 1877, and expressed a desire to become a Christian. A few words should be quoted here from Professor Chandler's letter, informing us that Dr. Harper added "that he was not sure that he understood exactly what it was to be a Christian, but whatever it was, he desired to be one. He made almost exactly the same remarks at the next church meeting, a large gathering, just a day or two later. Both these brief speeches were made in a very quiet and natural way, with little display of emotion, so far as I could see. What impressed me deeply was the moral courage required, in a meeting where so many of his own students and colleagues were present, to get up and make this simple statement and request, especially in a community where it was assumed that every instructor was of course a Christian and *ex officio* a religious worker. The natural suggestion to a man in his position would have been to seek private instruction of a clergyman, and to have it seem to be a mere change of denominational relations. It seemed to me to be eminently characteristic of Harper's honesty of mind and simplicity and directness of method that he did just as he did." After this second meeting, he stated to Professor Chandler, probably in these exact words: "I am not a Christian, but I want to be one, and I mean to be one." He was baptized in February, 1877. Perhaps fifteen years afterward, at a

<sup>2</sup> That of Professor Charles Chandler, M.A., then of Denison University, now of the University of Chicago, to whom the writer is deeply indebted for a long and informing letter, mailed January 22, 1906.

Denison banquet given in his honor in Cincinnati, he spoke of his love for Granville, "because it was there that I became a Christian." The present writer has the impression that, at a meeting in Northfield ten or fifteen years ago, Dr. Harper gave an address upon his religious experience, and students of his life would do well to look up the printed accounts of that meeting.

The facts of the Granville period have been given in detail because they furnish the key to his whole life and to his unique personality. The clear, and bold, and unimpassioned statement of his new purposes and hopes was characteristic of his later and more profound experiences, particularly that of the Lakewood-Chicago period, March-December, 1905, following the surgical operation of February, when the real nature of his malady was discovered. Characteristic also were his frequent conferences with his most trusted friends; for he was in the habit of looking to such advisers in every exigency of life. During the Morgan Park days, at the opening of his campaign for Bible study, perplexities abounded, and his friends were frequently summoned to suggest the solution of problems, such as, e. g., ways and means by which the week-end bills of the printing establishment might be met. It was at one such interview, in 1883, that the writer first entered into the depths of the nature of William R. Harper, and observed the rare combination of valiant confidence and almost childlike dependence that distinguished him. It was in these small circles that the essentially social type of his manhood was manifest. Nothing suited him better than to gather about him a small company of his intimates at his home, or at the best table afforded by the place where he was at the time, for the discussion of the plans that were uppermost in his mind, and for the settlement of vexed questions of detail; and his hospitality on such occasions was unbounded, his expenditures lavish. The writer's mind recurs again and again to the joyous type of man, represented frequently in the Old Testament, which was illustrated so well in his table indulgencies, in his delight in his friends, in his enthusiastic enjoyment of life, even in his desire to placate hostile critics. With reference to one of these, who had spoken rather sharply of something he had done, he once said to the writer: "Brown, find out, if you can, just how he looks upon this matter."

It has been said that Dr. Harper was naturally reticent about his

spiritual experiences, and it is probably true that very little of his time, relatively, was devoted to contemplation; but testimony abounds of his active co-operation with religious leaders in their work, and with distressed souls in their search for light. It is clear that he felt constantly his obligation to God for the right use of his time, but that reason and conscience, rather than emotion, were controlling; clearest of all, that he appreciated the grandeur of duty and felt himself to be the agent of the Infinite Worker. All this is brought out into such bold relief by his acts and utterances during the last eventful year of his life that we must pass on to this.

It was probably at Lakewood, N. J., in March of last year, that the period of spiritual growth, culminating in the triumphant faith of the last days on earth, may be said to open. Here, so far as is known, began the intense mental struggle for personal light upon the final problems of religion, sin and its forgiveness, our relation to Jesus Christ and to God, immortality. The writer does not know to how many of his friends he revealed the movements of his mind at this time. It is certain that some of them helped him to clarify his notions, and that from that time to the end he gave the closest attention to whatever the chosen few could bring to bear upon the questions he had raised. In the process he himself gave the most concentrated energy, he was the calmest counselor, the most unmoved inspector of his own mind; and, finally, soon after Christmas time, the victory, the brightest victory of all, was achieved. It seems to his friends, as it did to Harper himself, that his own conclusions were the clear statements of ideas which had been at the basis of all his action, but which there had been no time to formulate: God, the Spirit, the Ultimate Force in the universe, and the Source of all life therein; Jesus Christ, his Son, the Revealer of God and the representative Man; a sphere of enlarged work beyond, of the nature of which his soul had no idea, but which he could enter with less hesitation than he did upon his work at Chicago—these were the fundamental verities of his thought. Perhaps the most marked token of the depth of his religious experience was that his heart became so sensitive to the faults that he had manifested. He would not assent to the characterization of these in any other terms than such as his friends could but regard as extravagant condemnation.

On the afternoon of the twenty-ninth of December, as he lay in the southwest chamber of the President's house, patiently waiting for the end soon to come, and yet so conscious of the value of time that the precious moments must be utilized, he called to him four out of the multitude of his friends, took their hands as they sat about his bed, and with perfect poise, in the full use of his superb mind, he calmly talked with them about what he had styled the "deepest things." And then he said: "Now let us talk with God; let us not be formal, let us be simple." And when each in turn had prayed, he himself offered a petition of wondrous clearness, simplicity, and affecting power. Let us listen to a portion of his prayer: "And may there be for me a life beyond this life, and in that life may there be work to do, tasks to accomplish. If in any way a soul has been injured, or a friend hurt, may the harm be overcome, if it is possible; and this I ask in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen." The friends felt that the prophet of God had been transformed into the high-priest of his sanctuary, and that they, too, saw something of the Invisible.